

FOLKLORE AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES:
A VIEW FROM THE RUINED TOWER

Shortly before the date of my first comprehensive examination in folklore, a distinguished Chaucerian and folklorist charged with composing a portion of the tests called me into his office. It had been suggested that his set of questions include one or two on some topic concerning modern folklore. He was perplexed. "Ballad, riddle, proverb, **Märchen**--they're all of 'em medieval." After an embarrassing silence, I suggested a question on the appropriateness of modern theoretical approaches applied to these "medieval" genres. "Such as?" growled he. Another silence. Incautiously, I proposed structuralism. My appointment came to an abrupt close, and his portion of my exam proved to be as severely historic-geographic, philological, and literary as his outraged imagination could well devise. It was clear that, in his view, modern folklore study concerned itself with dubious theorizing over the negligible leavings of a folklorically richer era, and that undue attention to these leavings would inevitably lead to shoddy and decadent theorizing fit only for French philosopher-savants and Princetonians.

Times change, so too do the weighty and durable assumptions of the academy. As implicitly as he believed in his nineteenth-century heart that any student who escaped an education in the liberal arts without fluency in Latin was only half-fledged, the professor of my story also believed that no folklorist worthy of the name could escape the concomitant role of medievalist. Both assumptions were based on a view of the humanities as an essentially historical, evolutionary study: the review of the development of man's political and artistic expression from earliest times--"dawn" was a favorite word--until the present day. "Present" was often cautiously interpreted: "as recently as may be compatible with objective inquiry." Depending on one's point of view, "present" might be today, or might fall somewhere between Charles Dickens and Henry James.

This notional conservatism makes us smile--and indeed, it has been lovingly preserved as conscious anachronism by those who still appreciate the value of a reputation for cantankerousness. But we ought not to condescend to or discredit the motives of those who held these notions in earnest: in general, the best of these scholars attended to the past not as an escape from the literary and historical events of their time, but as a vantage upon them. Objectivity was a virtue much prized in a scholar then as now, and a virtue that seemed far more accessible. As the laboratory was seen as a controlled environment for a researcher in the natural sciences, so in the view of the nineteenth-century scholar, the past, insulated from bias by time, was seen as controlled area of investigation as well.

In his introduction to this volume, Carl Lindahl has pointed out the roots of both medieval and folklore studies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as fields grounded in the humanities. Yet it should be remembered that during this period, right up to the early decades of the twentieth century, the territories belonging to the humanities and the sciences had not yet been as clearly delineated or as fiercely defended on both sides as they are today. The objectives of the nineteenth century medievalists and folklorists were substantially the same: their concern was with the genealogy of a text: its gradual metamorphosis through intentional and accidental alteration, whether by the agency of a lively storyteller in a village, or a lazy clerk in a monastic scriptorium. Whether the text under consideration represented a version of a tale or ballad, or a branch of a Chaucerian manuscript tradition, the method of the scholar remained largely the same: he amassed as many variant texts as possible, and applied to these texts certain systematic, consistent and objective procedures. The goal was the determination of a postulated original form, either by speculative reconstruction through analogy, by pruning away suspected later accretions and interpolations, or by establishing criteria which would lead to the one text of all those available that might be presumed closest to the earliest form. Only when the nature of this earliest form had been established could further reflections on structure, style, and aesthetic proceed.¹

Both the medievalist and the folklorist conceived of the application of systematic method to the process of determining a primary text as a **scientific** process leading to a conclusion which, though not objectively verifiable, ought yet to be the consistent result of any individual's conscientious application of the same rules. Among folklorists, it is not surprising to find that aggressive defender of the historic-geographic method, Kearle Krohn, using imagery straight from the laboratory:

A proponent of a science may not . . . function as a champion, he is also obliged to weigh his own views as an impartial judge. . . . In the area of folk literature and folk belief beautiful castles in the air have been built with precious subtlety and fantasy on a foundation of insufficient, disordered, and unreliable materials--some, even arbitrarily constructed. . . . It is time to pass over from philosophizing and mythologizing to actual interpretation and microscopic study of available materials in order to draw tenable, general conclusions corresponding to facts from individual results.²

Students of medieval literature as well as folklorists were enamored of the scientific model. When reading George Lyman Kittredge's self-revealing biographical essay on Francis James Child, we are inclined to be both drawn to and impatient with the romantic, even shamanistic vision of Child invoking "an instinct . . . so cultivated by long and loving study that it had become wonderfully swift in its operations and almost infallible"³ in the evaluation of the traditionality of his texts.⁴ We too readily overlook the fact that Kittredge presents us with this vignette to soften in part the impression of a coldly methodical intellect relentlessly at work.

As an investigator Professor Child was at once the inspiration and the despair of his disciples. Nothing could surpass the scientific exactness of his methods and the unwearied discipline with which he conducted his researches. . . .⁵

In the three or four decades preceding Mr. Child's residence in Europe, Germanic philology (in the larger

sense) had past from the stage of "romantic" dilettantism into the condition of a well-organized and strenuous scientific discipline . . . but the freshness and vivacity of the first half of the century had not vanished.⁶

The overall impression is not of a shaman guided by revelation, but rather of a Sherlock Holmes-like figure, whose method of reasoning by deduction was so swift as to appear intuitive. Throughout the essay Kittredge maintains a balance of attitude, poised between the undeniable appeal of the "freshness and vivacity" of "'Romantic' dilettantism" and the demands of "a well-organized and strenuous scientific discipline."

Henry Glassie has half-facetiously characterized the position of contemporary folklore study as seated over the fissure between the sciences and the humanities, like the Delphic Oracle "sniffing the fumes that rise from it and offering grand pronouncements."⁷ The oracle at Delphi is indeed a good image for most contemporary folklore study, for her grand pronouncements, sometimes obscure and often misinterpreted, concern largely matters of the present and the future. The image characterizing the folklorists and medievalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, an image which they themselves used repeatedly in describing their work, was that of men laboring amidst the ruined towers and castles of the past.⁸ The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave rise to the organized discipline of archaeology, in which real ruins were examined with increasingly scrupulous method in order to reconstruct in imagination the structure that once existed in fact. The same period also gave rise to the spirit of Romanticism in which the real ruin was so extravagantly admired for its own lovely sake that landscapers frequently had to supply fake ruins for their clients. The tension between these two tendencies of the time characterizes the best of the nineteenth century folklorists and medievalists: they reconciled themselves to grubbing industriously in unpromising rubble, while dreaming castle-dreams.

The archaeologists, folklorists, and medievalists exploring the past were figuratively or literally concerned with the castle, seemingly less concerned with its past

inhabitants. Both the scientific and the Romantic-nationalistic motives for attention to folklore and medieval studies required an essentially text-centered approach--indeed, a **texts**-centered approach. The scientific method excluded consideration of an individual aesthetic manifest in a particular text because speculation on such a slim base was chancy and beside the point: their attention was focused upon the continuity of expression over time. The Romantic attitude drew attention away from the individual text, its creator, and its attendant circumstances, since the Romantic emphasis was rather upon the concept of tradition as a communal expression of a communal aesthetic, the characteristic collective voice of the folk. But as evolutionary assumptions concerning art and civilization came under increasing fire in the early twentieth century, the basis for both scientific and Romantic attention to the past was undermined. As Lindahl has pointed out, Kittredge himself led the attack in English literature by rescuing Chaucer from those who condescended to him as "a good poet for his time" by demonstrating that Chaucer was a superb poet for all time, doing so by demonstrating that Chaucer fulfilled all criteria for poetic excellence in the second decade of the twentieth century. Kittredge's major defense of the last of England's great medieval poets was launched in **Chaucer and His Poetry** in 1915,⁹ the assault upon nineteenth-century assumptions and priorities concerning medieval literature was made complete by J.R.R. Tolkien's masterful defense of the first of that literary lineage--the **Beowulf**-poet, whose artistry is movingly described in the essay "**Beowulf--the Monsters and the Critics**."¹⁰

Tolkien offers his own version of their image of the worker in the ruin, in an allegorical reproach:

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labor, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions. . . . They all

said: "This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): "What a muddle it is in!"¹¹

It's worth pointing out, however, that many of the revelations of poetic beauty made by scholars in search of the artist responsible for a text depend upon methodical and necessary grubbing in the ruins. Appreciation of Chaucer's splendid use of meter, for example, was impossible until Child and others had cleared the way for an understanding of late fourteenth-century grammar and pronunciation. Prior to Child's work, as Kittredge himself acknowledged, "scarcely anything . . . was known of Chaucer's grammar and meter in a sure and scientific way."¹² Philologia, a handmaid of the sciences, may not outrank Poesis, but she must nonetheless generally precede her in the study of medieval folklore and literature.

As the medievalists admired the newly-revealed genius of the creators of their texts, they gradually edged away from the concept of tradition as a determinant force influencing their artists. Those texts seeming to be of little aesthetic value were left for the folklorists. Meanwhile, folklorists were increasingly concerned with the delineation of the dynamics of the process of creation in tradition, and were beginning to search in the present for answers to questions raised by the texts of the past. The work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord begun in the thirties culminated in the publication of Lord's *Singer of Tales*,¹³ in which compositional techniques actually observed in the performance of Serbo-Croatian epic were used to explain the style and structure of ancient Homeric epic. This work provided the means to appreciate an aesthetic essentially pre-literate in origin, but applicable with varying success to creative expression within traditional limits in contemporary literate cultures as well. At least since Azadovskii's classic study *A Siberian Tale Teller* was published in 1926,¹⁴ folklorists, too, have pursued the study of creative expression, following the example of this monograph in what Richard Bauman has called its "pioneering effort in the exploration of such performance-related problems as the community base of folklore performance, the organization of expressive repertoire, and the relationship between individual personality and

performance form, all with a primary focus on the individual performer."¹⁵ This shift in emphasis in folklore studies has gone largely unrecognized by literary critics, who cling to the picture of the folklorist as Tolkien's short-sighted tower-toppler. On the other hand, a bit giddy from those Delphic fumes, and accustomed to pronouncing importantly upon performances present and future, the folklorist today is inclined to look with mild surprise and pity upon those who appear to choose voluntarily to potter away a scholarly life in the castles of the past. But both folklorists and medievalists today show signs of awakening to one another's too-long hidden virtues. Students of medieval studies are beginning to realize that a full appreciation of early texts and objects must take into account continuities of behavior and attitudes prevalent in the past and no longer readily discernible--continuities which folklorists have evolved tools to identify by using understandings drawn from the seemingly similar patterns in the present.¹⁶ And folklorists are beginning to find that the "presentistic" emphasis of contemporary folklore study, while offering the reassuring trappings of science and technology in documenting consistent patterns in face-to-face encounters of today, still requires the scholar to return to the unforgiving text or object from the past in order to determine continuity or change of any pattern over time.

The problems facing the researcher in medieval folklore are similar to those facing the archaeologist. Archaeology and folklore study have both outgrown their treasure-hunting stage, in which objects were isolated from the overall scheme of a site, folkloric tidbits from their function and significance in a full text. In the article cited above, Henry Glassie describes the shared goals of contemporary archaeologists and folklorists involved in the study of material culture, all of whom use the artifact as a tool in "the comprehension of the variation of intentions in time."¹⁷ The medieval folklorist, too, deals with the artifact--the text, whether it be a verbal or material expression. Glassie remarks that the "written artifact" may have use "as long as we are willing to study the literate, the wealthy, and the mal-adjusted"¹⁸--but the written artifacts available to the

medieval folklorist are more often as homely, sane, unself-conscious, and quietly eloquent as the clay pipes and broken pots of the archaeological site, and as useful in reconstructing patterns of life of the common man.

We do not lack for these written artifacts. We have the legal records of a litigious age, records rich in human detail. We have didactic writings and sermons praising the virtuous patterns of everyday and condemning everyday vices specifically enumerated in long catalogs. We have "literary" texts not produced for the delectation of a silent and isolated reader, but for the pleasure and imaginative participation of a living audience of listeners. We have physical artifacts as well--buildings and objects expressing both the exalted philosophies and the simplest domestic patterns. There is a surprising quantity of personal documents surviving: letters, household accounts, written injunctions concerning behavior addressed from parent to child, from husband to wife. But like the clay pipe and the broken pot, these artifacts require imaginative and responsible interpretation.

Study of medieval folklore requires the researcher whose background has been limited to medieval studies to attend to context to an unfamiliar extent; study of medieval folklore requires the folklorist to forego access to context to an unfamiliar extent. To literary scholars still adhering to the tenets of the New Criticism, in which most extra-textual determinants and influences are not considered, study of medieval literature poses almost insurmountable problems of interpretation. To folklorists adhering to a strictly "contextualist" stance, the lack of reliable objective information concerning the setting and circumstances under which medieval texts were presented, medieval objects used, renders the texts and objects useless as expressions documenting continuities and changes in patterns of human expressive behavior.¹⁹ But for medievalists and folklorists willing to take a sporting attitude toward the text, the study of medieval folklore offers a rewarding and entertaining quest, and an abundance of game worthy of pursuit--as may be seen by the articles presented in this special issue of **Folklore Forum**.

Robert Creed, taking a single line of **Beowulf** in his article "Is There An Ancient Gnome in **Beowulf** line

4?" reveals in that one line the memory of a prehistoric way of life. In his application of linguistic tools to paleoanthropological issues, Creed represents a new approach with an ancient and noble lineage: a fruitful twentieth-century wedding of philology and folklore.

In "Conception Through Infancy in Medieval English Historical and Folklore Sources," Barbara Hanawalt shows how both folklorists and historians may benefit from investigation in one another's domain--the folklorist learning from legal and ecclesiastical records something of the everyday realities of kinship and childrearing which inform the fictive accounts in ballad and lyric, the historian deriving insight into the motivations and emotions as well as traditional influences demonstrated in the formulaic legal and pietistic accounts.

Joseph Harris' article "Folktale and **Thattr**: the Case of **Rognvald and Raud**" reminds us that the methods and tools of historic-geographic inquiry in the study of a folktale must be enriched by attention to intellectual, religious, ecclesiastical, and historical influences upon the creators of texts. Understanding of these factors may then be placed at the service of sensitive appreciation of the artistic adaptations wrought upon individual tales.

The hunt in the Middle Ages provided an area for elaborate social ritual, as well as a rich source of metaphor both secular and religious. Virginia Lowe demonstrates how an understanding of the complex of attitudes and images relating to the hunt illuminates and integrates a hitherto little-appreciated romance in her article "Folklore as a Unifying Factor in **The Awntyrs off Arthure**."

The issue of oral performance of medieval literary texts has been long argued, generally using internal evidence from the poems themselves and consistently continuing to focus on the author/performer in isolation, rather than on the performance as a complex experience shared and shaped by the audience and the reciter. Bruce Rosenberg, in "The Oral Performance of Chaucer's Poetry: Situation and Medium," addresses the question of the role of audience interaction in the readings.

The final article, a translation of B. Rybakov's "Macrocosm in the Microcosm of Folk Art," proposes the use of a synthesis of skills to reveal ancient cosmo-

logical symbolism in the folk art of Eastern Europe using artifacts dating from the Middle Ages to the present day. In its emphasis on the importance of investigating the historical dimension behind contemporary expressions, pursuing developments of form and meaning reflecting the creators' changing perceptions of the earth and skies, this article gives a fascinating interpretation of seemingly abstract or arbitrary visual expressions.

Emily Yoder's note on "The Wandering Jew in the Alliterative Morte Arthure" points to a far earlier European currency for this legend than had been previously recognized, and adduces historical circumstances for its geographical distribution over time. Research such as this not only clarifies our understanding of seemingly obscure references in medieval literature, it also gives us useful clues concerning the nature of dissemination of legend, and its use in literary expression.

Wraetlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebraecon;
burgstede burston, brosnap enta geweorc.²⁰

A wonder is this masonry, fates-broken;
Places men lived in shattered--giants' work is crumbling.

In examining the material and textual legacy of the Middle Ages, we well may echo the words of the tenth-century writer of the elegy *The Ruin*--well may we wonder, standing amidst these remains. How can we reconstruct in imagination the structures that once reared, lived in and living? The Old English poet, an inhabitant of wooden buildings, could fancifully people the Roman ruins of stone with another race of beings entirely: the stone walls were "giants' making." We as students of medieval folklore, contemplating the leavings that serve as our texts, search not for giants in these ruined towers, but for common men and women. Contemplation of the past, indeed: but in the end, it is ourselves as well we hope to find.

Erika Brady

NOTES

1

For statements expressing a typical concern for the priority of determination of a primary text, see Kaarle Krohn, **Die Folkloristische Arbeitsmethode** (Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1926); translated as **Folklore Methodology**, trans. Roger L. Welsch (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 162-63; and the remarks of Johannes Steenstrup cited in Iorn Pio, "Svend Grundtvig," in **Leading Folklorists of the North**, ed. Dag Strömback (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), p. 204.

2

Krohn, p. 175.

3

George Lyman Kittredge, "A Biographical Sketch of Professor Child," in **The English and Scottish Popular Ballads**, ed. Francis James Child (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882-1894), pp. xxiii-xxxii.

4

The classic critique of Child's process of evaluation of ballad texts is Thelma James, "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads of Francis James Child," **Journal of American Folklore** 46 (1933): 51-68; reprinted in abridged form in **The Critics and the Ballad**, ed. MacEdward Leach and Tristram P. Coffin (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), pp. 12-19.

5

Kittredge, p. xxix.

6

Kittredge, p. xiv.

7

Henry Glassie, "Archaeology and Folklore: Common Anxieties, Common Hopes," in **Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things**, ed. Leland Ferguson, Society for Historical Archaeology Special Publication Series no. 2 (Lansing, Michigan: Society for Historical Archaeology, 1977), p. 24.

8

For example, Richard Berström, "Svend Grundtvig," in **Svenska Landsmälen** 7 (1886-1892): 23, cited in Iorn Pio, "Svend Grundtvig," in Strömback, p. 211.

9

George Lyman Kittredge, **Chaucer and His Poetry** (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1915).

10

J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936): 245-95; reprinted in **The Beowulf Poet**, ed. Donald Fry (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 8-56.

11

Tolkien, p. 11.

12

Kittredge, p. xxvi.

13

Albert B. Lord, **The Singer of Tales** (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960).

14

Mark Azadovskii, **Eine Sibirische Märchenerzählerin**, *Folklore Fellows Communication* no. 68 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1926); translated as **A Siberian Tale Teller**, trans. James R. Dow, *Center for Intercultural Studies in Folklore and Ethnomusicology Monograph Series* no. 2 (Austin: University of Texas, 1974).

15

Azadovskii, p. iii.

16

In light of this promising trend, see the recently published **Chivalric Literature: Essays on the Relations Between Literature and Society in the Later Middle Ages**, ed. Larry Dean Benson and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1980).

17

For a recent statement in the ongoing dialogue among folklorists concerning text and context and the parameters of the study of folklore, see Robert A. Georges, "Toward a Resolution of the Text/Context Controversy," **Western Folklore** 39 (1980): 34-40.

18

Glassie, pp. 28-29.

19

See Georges, pp. 36-37, as well as Steven Jones, "Slouching Towards Ethnography: The Text/Context Contro-

versy Reconsidered," **Western Folklore** 38 (1979): 54,
n. 1.

20

The Exeter Book, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliot
Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press,
1936), p. 227.